Case Studies

Name:
Jill Hickman

Title:
Tapping into the Motivation to Change

The Results:
When people are feeling pessimistic about their company's mission, you may hear "We're not performing any miracles here." But what if an organization's purpose really is to provide miraculous cures for life-threatening illnesses? As Jill Hickman found out, employees with such important goals are not as likely to fall victim to poor morale. But neither does that mean they have all the skills they need to do their job effectively.

Hickman, a long-time trainer and consultant, was recently asked to help improve the communication skills of workers in a large healthcare organization. The employees were responsible for the facility's safety, alarm system, maintenance, and similar functions. The organization's leaders simply wanted Hickman to teach the employees better telephone skills. However, she believes that interpersonal issues are not that simple.

"Every single time, management wants something and you find that they need something completely different," Hickman says. "So you have to be a resource to them. If you go in and just do what they say they want, you're not really helping. That's like a hit and run."

Hickman saw that she had to make management aware of the organization's true problems. To uncover deeper issues, she talked with the center's workers and noted how they interacted. During her discussions and observations, she avoided preconceived notions of what instruments to use or systems to employ, which she says is essential to a proper needs assessment.

"Whenever I first visit a client, I never go with anything to sell," Hickman says. "I don't ever bring anything with me, except a notepad, and I just ask questions."

Using this system, Hickman learned that the center's workers were prone to frequent interruptions and the sloppy handling of important phone calls. The frustration among the staff was evident, and the high-tension environment did not help matters.

"There was a lot of screaming and yelling over the desks," Hickman says. "And the lack of technical knowledge was so bad that some people didn't even know how to transfer a call."

The physical layout of the office was awkward, but that did not explain all the difficulties that the workers were having. Instead, Hickman discovered that the employees were unable to prioritize tasks. She realized that improving this skill and showing the workers how to manage their time were vital goals.

Using the results of her analysis, Hickman identified the *Time Mastery Profile®* as a possible solution. She got the center's leaders aboard by explaining that good time management would reduce the workers' stress and improve productivity. She then devised sessions that would bring the profile's insights to life as well as tap into the employees' enthusiasm for their jobs.

"Everyone in the center has a powerful mission in terms of what they are there to do," Hickman says. "They are driven by their role in fighting cancer."

Keeping this concept in mind, Hickman introduced the *Time Mastery Profile* to the participants. The employees responded well to the instrument's results, although several participants were shocked at their personal scores.

"Many of them didn't realize how much of an effect simple interruptions had on their days," Hickman says. "It allowed us to discuss steps they could take to improve in that and other areas."

Hickman and the participants went on to identify what time-management skills were most significant for peak effectiveness. She then helped them devise individual action plans to implement positive changes. But while personal improvements made for worthy goals, Hickman wanted the participants to expand their thinking by looking at department-wide issues.

Using her "colored-dot technique," Hickman showed how individual shortcomings added up to group problems. She had each participant identify his or her two lowest scores of the profile categories. Then the participants took individually colored stickers and placed them on a group chart.

"If we see twenty stickers in one place, we know where the department has the biggest problems," Hickman says. "You get a real visual."

With the *Time Mastery Profile's* insights on display, the participants brainstormed with Hickman for good solutions. The wish lists that the employees drew up led to departmental action plans that were designed to reinforce the participants' new skills. And because the employees were highly motivated to resolve their problems, they were not shy about embracing ambitious goals.

Among the solutions that the participants developed were informal policies to avoid high-traffic areas and to call each other on the phone rather than shout over the cubicles. However, perhaps the most creative idea was to address "the popcorn problem."

"After talking about it, they realized one of the chief complaints was that the smell of popcorn drove many workers to distraction," Hickman says. "So now popcorn is only made at certain times or in a different location."

It seems like a leap to go from a discussion of time-management techniques to the nuances of popcorn preparation. However, Hickman says that training sessions often give workers their first chance to talk openly about problems, and so side issues that are still relevant sometimes come up. She adds that when time management is addressed honestly, healthy discussions about workplace respect and productivity can arise.

Invigorated by their training and discussions, the participants went on to apply their skills to their work. They educated their clients about the division's priorities and limitations, rather than just trying to cram everything in and do it all. Even more important, the workers were better able to prioritize incoming calls, which had been a definite weak spot.

"In our conversations, the employees realized that they had been giving every phone call the same status, and responding to all calls as an emergency," Hickman says. "But now they respond to calls and requests according to a prioritized system, treating a request to adjust a room's temperature differently than if it were a critical fire alarm."

As a result of the workers' efforts, overtime was reduced while morale remained solid. Furthermore, the company's leaders noticed the improvements and were inspired to look into

additional technical training and to devise new systems to identify emergency situations.

All of this came out of a discussion of time management. Hickman says the combination of the profile's insights and the workers' dedication created an environment where innovation could prosper.

"Getting these things fixed was important to them," Hickman says. "They wanted to do a good job. And they are."